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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1990, the community of Gainesville, Florida, needed information concerning the brutal murders of five local college students. These serial slayings disrupted numerous "scripts" of life in the typical college town and produced a blanket of uncertainty, fear, and hysteria which enveloped Gainesville. College towns are normally viewed as places unlike any others. Seemingly populated predominantly by students, college towns are considered safe havens where parents can send their children with little worry other than that produced by the empty-nest syndrome. The happenings in Gainesville negated the beliefs that a locked door was an option or that all people were potential friends with a lot in common. Some students went so far as to withdraw from school. Instead of offering the information the community desperately requested (and which was not accessible), "The Gainesville Sun" elected to offer the community pseudo-knowledge in the form of scripts which allowed the return of homeostasis. An analysis of excerpts from the newspaper's articles and opinion pages shows how, in essence, through a series of metaphors such as the Ted Bundy metaphor, the father metaphor (which involved the paternal football coach), the seasons metaphor, and the drama metaphor, the newspaper created a new reality which served as the basis for new life scripts. These new scripts served to reduce uncertainly and cognitive dissonance and facilitated the coping process needed in the crisis situation. (Contains 18 references.) (RS)

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METAPHOR REPLACES FACT:

Dissonance Reduction During the Gainesville Serial Slayings Through Metaphorical Script Writing

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ABSTRACT

In the Fall of 1990, the community of Gainesville, Florida, needed information concerning the brutal murders of five college students. These serial slayings disrupted numerous scripts of life in the relatively peaceful college town and produced a shroud of uncertainty and fear which enveloped Gainesville.

The function of the news media purportedly is to convey information and ideally to do so as accurately and objectively as possible. In this instance, the information which the community sought was unavailable. *The Gainesville Sun*, however, substituted metaphor for information thereby forming a base from which the community could create new life scripts to form a new reality and to help its dissonance.

Barton (1969) defined a "collective stress situation" as one which

> occurs when many members of a social system fail to receive expected conditions of life from the system. These conditions of life include the safety of the physical environment, protection from attack,.. and guidance and information necessary to carry on normal activities. (p. 38)

Killian (1954) described the above types of crucial situations or crisis as "a disruption of the social context in which the individual functions." (p. 67) Killian further explained that "deaths, injuries, destruction of property and disruption of com nications all acquire importance principally as departures from the pattern of normal expectations upon which the individual builds up his or her actions from minute to minute." Thus, a crisis can create the need to reduce the cognitive dissonance caused by the situation. This is what happened on August 25, 1990, in Gainesville, Florida. One avenue for the ability to cope with this crisis situation may have been found through the local newspaper's use of metaphorical script-writing. Metaphor can be used to create a fictitious experience which can be used to restore lost certainty and reduce dissonance. Through this fictitious experience, the "minute to minute" uncertainty of the Gainesville community, especially the student population, could be replaced by renewed feelings of assurance. The notion of uncertainty, or cognitive dissonance, that the community experienced can be viewed through the perspective of information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957, 1964).

Information theory in its base form is discussed in mathematical terms of the information value of a signal as the log 1/p or "the number of things a system (an information source, for instance) can do and of the probabilities of

occurrence of those different possibilities." (Darnell, 1972, p. 156) That is, "information is what you don't know about what is going to happen next." (p. 157) Thus, uncertainty can be fixed upon by the amount of variables that might occur in a certain situations and the possibility of their occurrence. (Berger & Bradac, 1982) For example, we know Halley's comet will blaze across the sky approximately every seventy-five years. This occurrence is predictable and the uncertainty of whether the mysterious fireball will crash to earth is greatly reduced. On the other hand, if a random fiery object appeared, or, in this case, a serial killer appears in the community, the alternatives would be more open to variation, and would, therefore, increase our uncertainty. Following this line of reasoning, information and communication that is understood and processed can greatly reduce uncertainty and heighten knowledge. In contrast, the inability to explain behaviors or beliefs increases uncertainty and "lowers our ability to exercise control in a situation and (this) decreases the probabilities that we will obtain our goals in the interaction, whatever these goals might be." (Berger & Bradac, 1982, p. 14) Thus, uncertainty reduction becomes an important aspect in a person's life.

According to Berger and Bradac (1982), the three conditions which incite this need for uncertainty reductions are confrontation of unexpected events, expectation of future interaction, and perceived costs and benefits of an interaction. (pp. 16-17) All of the above conditions apply to the Gainesville situation. Woven together with a crisis situation is the condition of "confrontation of unexpected events." If a person knew of an upcoming hardship, he or she would brace him- or herself for the effects. When the situation is unexpected, however, a person is left to only attempt

understanding. Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1981) contended that when people are confronted with new and unexpected behaviors or events, they seek avenues which will lead them to reduced uncertainty. The same assumption holds for the conditions of "expectation of future interaction" and "perceived costs and benefits of an interaction." Harvey, Yarkin, Lighter, and Town (1980) found evidence that suggested that people who felt they would have future interaction with, in this case, a person in a videotape, would seek and integrate more information in order to reduce the uncertainty. Kiesler (1969) pointed out that people who expect future interaction tend to be more attentive to the situation to gain more control and certainty. This final condition of perceived costs and benefits has been studied by Giles and Powesland (1975) who indicated that people tend to seek and reduce uncertainty or gain knowledge about those who can benefit or reward them. Nevertheless, it is perhaps equally important to have a handle on the "enemy" as lack of knowledge or understanding can be more costly when dealing with a foe than with a friend. Logically, this "cost" side can increase the need for uncertainty reduction as it did in Gainesville.

The fear and uncertainty which the serial staying engendered in Gainesville can also be understood in terms of the social-psychological concept of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance may be operationally defined as a relationship which can be assumed to exist between or among two or more conditions when one condition indicates, or at least implies, the obverse of the other(s). For example, A and B are dissonant if A implies not B. Dissonant states are motivational in that a person will attempt to reduce dissonance in order to achieve consonance in cognition(s) (Festinger, 1957, 1964).

The above ways to reduce uncertainty or dissonance each involve gaining information. One possible way that people may achieve prior knowledge is through the use of scripts. (Berger & Bradac, 1982) Abelson (1976) defined scripts as cognitive compositions that help people to attain greater understanding and knowledge in a uncertain situation. That is, scripts are like a copy of a text which a person can use in order to have a firmer grasp on a situation. The script allows a person to know what is coming up next. Certain scripts can be as basic as our morning rituals. The ritual of each morning - getting up to an alarm, showering, brushing our teeth, etc. - is a script we recite from memory each day. Other scripts we might have in our repertoire can range from driving to a familiar destination to our social interactions. (Berger & Bradac, 1982) Having these ritualized scripts allows us to "free our mind" so that we can tune to more substantial matters. These scripts narrow the amount of probabilities and variabilities that in turn allow for greater knowledge minute to minute and, even, day to day life. Langer (1978), however, stated that in the presence of certain disruptive conditions, these scripts can fail and make us uncertain about our situation. According to Langer (1978) the conditions are:

1. We encounter a novel situation for which we have no script.
2. The enactment of scripted behavior becomes effortful for some reason.
3. The enactment of scripted behavior is interrupted by external factors which prevent its completion.
4. We experience consequences which are discrepant with the consequences of prior enactments of the same script.
5. The situation does not permit sufficient involvement.

When these conditions present themselves, our scripts' validity is challenged, the possible variables are increased, and the certainty within the given situation is greatly lessened. As the uncertainty increases, people find themselves searching for a way to obtain understanding and knowledge to, once again, restore the state of fixed variables within our previous script.

One possible strategy to restore the amount of variables is reconstructing or re-fitting scripts. If, however, the disrupting agent or event is completely foreign to us, we do not have any prior information or knowledge to reconstruct a script by. A script must then be created to fulfill the need to reduce our induced uncertainty.

As discussed earlier, people prefer to observe the person about whom they wish to reduce uncertainty in a social situation to gain access to knowledge of that person's interaction strategies and behaviors. (Berger & Douglas, 1981) In doing this, people gain previously unknown information thereby forming an idea of how their meeting might go if they were to interact. In the same manner, people wishing to reduce uncertainty about a certain event or situation aspire to obtain some sort of prior knowledge from comparable or related events. A script may be created by looking to history for these comparable events. A person could compare a past event with a present situation in which uncertainty is present. This can be done with something as simple as watching films of the football team that is to be played next or as complicated as the comparisons drawn by experts attempting to gauge the outcome of a war in the Middle East based on the prior desert battles of World War II. The person strives to fit the past's model event onto the immediate situation, and essentially, stencils in an explanatory script.

In drawing the above comparisons between past situations to that of

present ones, the formation of a metaphor is seen. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have stated "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." (p. 5) Moreover, these metaphors can create reality and even guide future actions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Thus, it is plausible that using a metaphorical concept to compose a script will lend greater understanding of a foreign situation in terms of a known one. One example of this understanding and guidance is Carpenter's (1990) discussion of the metaphor "combatants as frontiersmen." Carpenter stated that "many people, particularly Americans, saw combat metaphorically as an extension of our frontier experience." (p. 1) Carpenter suggested that viewing combatants as part of the taming of a nation like the frontiersmen enabled the American people to "understand" and believe in the war effort. Therefore, the metaphor reduced the amount of variables in the questionable situations of possible war and replaced the doubt with the certainty of the "glorious cause of Manifest Destiny." Carpenter, however, proposed that the use of this metaphorical concept may be potentially destructive. Like Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Carpenter viewed metaphor as having the ability to define reality, in that, metaphor tends to bring to light only certain aspects of reality while concealing others. This occurrence gears people to focus only on half-truths by which they make inferences to the world. Although the frontiersmen metaphorical concept "often characterized American's subsequent combat, tragically in Vietnam" (Carpenter, 1990, p. 1), taking this narrow of a view neglects a potential opportunity metaphor creates. The "combatant as frontiersmen" metaphor not only develops a frame of reference in which to guide our future thoughts and actions, the metaphor reduced the American people's uncertainty about the war by

providing them with a past experience in which to draw needed information from. The American people were now able to "read ahead" in the script provided for them through the metaphor, and were now able to visualize how the war would effect them. The previous crisis of thoughts of what horrifying things might happen became variables of the past.

Furthermore, the above circumstance of the American people being faced with the uncertainty of war may be likened to that which the student population encountered in Gainesville during the August, 1990, slayings of four University of Florida students and one student of Santa Fe Community College. These murders disrupted numerous scripts of life in the college town, and a blanket of uncertainty and fear covered Gainesville.

Life in a college town is normally viewed as a place unlike any other. Seemingly populated predominantly by students, college towns are considered to be safe havens where parents can send their children with little worry other than that produced by the empty-nest syndrome. Understandably, the mindset is that this is a place where locked doors are a good idea, but life-threatening forces do not have to be contended with. The beginning of a new semester is a time of meeting new friends with whom you probably have much in common. What happened in Gainesville at the beginning of the Fall, 1990, semester negated the above beliefs of those who held them. No longer were locked doors an option, one had to lock, bolt, and fortify their homes. No longer were the people you met looked upon as potential friends with a lot in common, for each new person could be the "one." Thus, no longer did some people sleep in their own home, let in the maintenance man, or take out the trash without at least two other friends, a can of mace or a gun (Had there been a rent a pitbull business, it would have

been eminently successful). People's thoughts were taken over by questions why, who, how, and what next. The subsequent search for uncertainty reduction is apparent in retrospect. The people of Gainesville became glued to their newspapers each morning searching for fitted pieces of the puzzle that might answer their questions and relieve their fears. Even people's ritual scripts of everyday living were devastated, and they were left clueless as to their next move. Some people reduced their uncertainty by leaving for the more certain and comprehensible situation of home. Approximately two percent of the student population withdrew from school or opted to wait it out at home. The rest began the process of creating a new script in which to draw an understanding into the chaos their lives had become.

Interestingly, the local newspaper *The Gainesville Sun* became the script-writer. In lieu of the information the community desperately requested, the newspaper chose to use not only comparisons but metaphor to aid in the creation of the needed scripts. In essence, the newspaper gave the community psuedo-knowledge in order to allow the return of homeostasis.

On August 29, 1990, the script-writing emerged visibly. *The Gainesville Sun* printed several articles with titles such as: "Serial Killings Stir Memories of Ted Bundy," "Serial Killer Seems Likely," "Profile of a Mass Murderer," "FBI Seeks Man Accused of Ohio Mutilation," and "Images of Bundy." Several of these articles, either implicitly or explicitly, compared Theodore Bundy with the Gainesville Murderer. The Bundy metaphor yielded information. The accuracy of the comparison or the information is not really the issue.

The issue is that the Bundy metaphor yielded information which was the key to reducing dissonance and uncertainty and, therefore, the ability to

create new scripts. The community sought mostly information about the killer - what to look for when you looked through the peep-hole or in your parking lot. The metaphor implicitly conveyed a type of police sketch of the killer - the probability that he was a single, nice-looking, white male in his late twenties to mid-thirties. For example, the opening paragraph in the article "Serial Killer Seems Likely" (p. 1A) reads:

> The murderer of college students in Gainesville could be a white man in his late 20's or 30's, without an extensive criminal record, who kills to feel the thrill of domination and the pleasure of taking lives, according to one national expert on multiple murders.

The article "Serial Killings Stir Memories of Ted Bundy" (p. 14A) included a picture of Bundy, a nice looking white male in his mid-thirties, and it argued that just as Bundy left Tallahassee and headed to Gainesville, so too will the Gainesville killer leave Gainesville and head toward Tallahassee or Jacksonville ". . . for the same reasons [as did Bundy]."

The University of Florida's head football coach Steve Spurrier was portrayed in a fatherly, protective role in the article "Spurrier Allows Players to Comfort Girlfriends" (p. 14A):

> The University of Florida football players who want to ease the fears of their girlfriends will be allowed to break curfew to do so, UF coach Steve Spurrier said Tuesday.
>
> Spurrier said players with "steady girlfriends" will not be required to sleep in the athletic dormitory until the fear that has ripped Gainesville has settled.
>
> "I told the players that if they had steady girlfriends that want them to come spend the night on the sofa, they should go ahead and go," Spurrier said Tuesday after practice. "Especially some of the older guys. This is a special situation. It's something we can all understand."
>
> Spurrier, whose two daughters attend UF, said he

> has been touched by the same fear as other parents. His daughter Amy, a junior, lives at a sorority house. His other daughter, Lisa, a senior, lives at home.
>
> "I think they're both pretty safe," Spurrier said. "But as a father, this is the kind of thing that's your worst nightmare. It's so terrible."

Just as the articles in *The Gainesville Sun* sought to reduce the community's cognitive dissonance, so did the editorials. The lead editorial for Wednesday, August 29, 1990, was entitled "The Season of Fear" (p. 12A). It compared the then current Fall season with a new and different season -- a season of fear, and the editorial argued that just as the seasons of the year change so to "this madness will pass."

On Tuesday, September 4, 1990, the headline article in *The Gainesville Sun* was entitled "Police Say Killer Set Up a Play for Us" (p. 1A). The article drew a comparison which was that of the crime scenes as a play. This drama metaphor brought forth "information," this time on how the murders took place, another aspect of great concern. Although it could be argued the metaphor possibly increased dissonance by associating the murders with a horror film, it would seem to be more plausible that the drama metaphor proposed that, like the movies, the police could now possibly bait the killer to his capture. In addition, it could suggest that the police, having now seen the stage play, could conceivably have inside knowledge about the scenario and be able to wait backstage until the murderer appeared. Thus, potentially, there was hope that the reign of terror would soon come to a close.

In essence, through a series of metaphors such as the Bundy metaphor, the father metaphor, the seasons metaphor, and the drama metaphor, *The*

Gainesville Sun created a new reality which served as the basis for new life scripts. These new scripts then, in turn, served to reduce uncertainty and cognitive dissonance and facilitated the coping process needed in a crisis situation. Metaphor in a crisis, therefore, becomes an element of study in the dissonance and uncertainty reduction frame. It is unknown whether *The Gainesville Sun* understood the use of social support that they displayed. The print media's function (as in other forms as well) is in conveying information. Yet, the information the community sought was not accessible. Therefore, metaphor replaced fact and became a base from which the community could draw the experience needed to create new scripts to calm its hysteria.

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